

## NAM JUNE PAIK and ME

- Carol Brandenburg, April 2014

We met for the first time in 1974, when I became assistant to David Loxton, Director of the Television Laboratory at WNET/THIRTEEN. David organized a lunch at a nearby restaurant so the Lab's artists-in-residence and I could meet. Nam June was, as always, polite and self-effacing; he looked rumpled, and reminded me of an absent-minded professor. I had no idea then how brilliant he was...what a visionary. But I think even at that first meeting I was delighted by his infectious laugh; after that, I tried to make him laugh every time we were together.

My arrival at the TV Lab came after long-term artists' residencies at Studio 46 had been put in place (following an initial period of giving access to many artists, for just a few days at a time). One of my most important initial duties was scheduling studio time, and "managing" John Godfrey, the talented though cantankerous video editor/engineer who worked with the artists at Studio 46.

Nam June was a regular presence throughout the '70s, always working on one project or another. David – originally an innovative drama producer at WNET – gradually became more involved with the documentary side of TV Lab production, creating a new unit within the Lab to focus on that work. After a couple of years, the artist-in-residence program became "mine"...and, happily, Nam June along with it.

Early on, Nam June saw the potential of broadcast for disseminating artists' work. Unlike some of his colleagues, he was never obscure or pretentious; his videos were accessible and witty, always insightful, and often prescient. (I'll never forget the "promo" line for his *Global Groove*: "a glimpse at the television of tomorrow, when TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan phone book." That was in January 1973, a decade before cable TV became widely available.)

By the late '70s, I was overseeing the (NY State Council on the Arts-funded) artist-in-residence program and the *VTR* (*Video and Television Review*) series that presented those artists' works for local broadcast. In addition to the Independent Documentary Fund, David had also returned to his first love of drama – though still under the TV Lab "umbrella." We saw a little less of Nam June, as he focused less on broadcast and more on creating pieces – including large installations – that were acquired by museums and private collectors all over the world. (At least, this is my recollection.)

In the early '80s, I became executive producer of *MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH*, a CPB-funded weekly series (produced through the TV Lab) for presenting video and film work by independent producers all over the U.S. It ran for 3 seasons on PBS; by the time it was over, David had decided it was time to "close" the TV Lab. Times had changed...funding had grown increasingly difficult...and we wanted to go out from a position of strength, rather than see the Lab "die" in a long slow decline.

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It was just then – the summer of '83 – that Nam June came to me with a program idea: *Good Morning Mr Orwell*, a live NY-Paris special bringing together artists from both countries (and Germany as well) on New Year's Day 1984. I still don't know how we did it, especially in such a short time! As always, Nam June came up with the financing – much of it from the sale of limited-edition prints by participating artists Joseph Beuys, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham.

Even so, the technical logistics of putting together a live international broadcast – with multiple interactive components! – were truly daunting. Our only way of communicating was via telex, or very expensive phone calls. Nam June and I traveled to Paris for a week of meetings at FR3, our broadcast partner (I did as well as I could with my high-school French). And memorably, Nam June introduced me to steak tartare at La Coupole ("the only place I feel safe eating it!") We returned to New York cautiously optimistic that this could actually work.

The video engineers at WNET were absolutely thrilled by the challenge; they were coordinating with the BBC, whose satellite we had to use to help get our signal to Paris (really!) *Nobody* had ever attempted anything this complex before.

I arranged for WNET's top Performance Programming people – producer, director, technical director - to handle the broadcast...not realizing until afterward that with live TV, it's all about the "live" part! (None of them had ever done a live show before, either.) We lost the French satellite very early in the broadcast - and the technical director had a panic attack and literally "froze" at the switcher - but somehow we managed to fill the hour of airtime and accomplish much of what Nam June had envisioned.

He was thrilled, especially since he usually found "mistakes" more interesting than what had actually been planned! As always, he was a PR genius: *GMMO* got a huge amount of press coverage in the U.S., as well as in Europe. In Nam June's home country of Korea, it was truly an event – millions watched the live broadcast, in the middle of their night. That success made possible our next collaboration: *Bye Bye Kipling* in 1986, a co-production of WNET with KBS/Seoul and TV Asahi/Tokyo. The great climax of the program was planned to be the end of the Marathon at the Asian Games in Seoul, mixed with music by Philip Glass. Even though there turned out to be no suspense at the end of the race, it was still a "goose bumps" moment.

This time I'd learned my lesson, and hired live TV specialists. And this time it was a little easier – WNET now had a fax machine (one, for a 500-member staff) so I could communicate with Asia that way. Again Nam June and I traveled to meet with our broadcast partners in both countries. It wasn't until we landed in Seoul – after a very pleasant Korean Air flight in Prestige Class – that I realized what a huge

celebrity Nam June had become in his home country. We were greeted at 6 am by a pack of news crews (and Nam June's older sisters, in traditional Korean dress, who fussed over him – tucking in his shirt, smoothing his hair, etc. – so he'd look presentable for the cameras).

Every night during our week-long stay, our activities were covered on the nightly news. I began to be recognized myself – my waiter at the Hilton suddenly stepped back and said with wide eyes, "Why, you're Miss Carol," and bowed to me. Nam June and I met with the Mayor of Seoul (a former NJP classmate) and enjoyed a formal dinner at his sister's home, where we ate with sterling silver chopsticks and the only beverage offered was Scotch! Of course, we also spent many hours with the KBS producers who would be responsible for their segments.

Among other artists, Nam June managed to persuade David Bowie to join us at the NY location (a real coup!) and the broadcast went off mostly smoothly. Now, Nam June was ready for our most ambitious Global Adventure: *Wrap Around the World* in 1988, interconnecting 10 countries simultaneously. Somehow it came together in less than a year. During the spring, I traveled in Europe for 6 weeks straight, visiting broadcasters in 15 countries and returning with several partnerships in place. That summer, I went to the Soviet Union and to China; the segments from CCTV and Leningrad TV were among our best, with great live music.

There was *so much* to coordinate with that many participants – we had moments of near-perfection, but plenty of "misses" as well! Nonetheless, it was a great achievement and Nam June seemed over the moon. He wasn't finished yet – with support from Sony, he went on to make an edited 3 VHS set of our three live shows, sold as a limited-edition in Japan and given to key production staffers. (He hired me to get all the necessary clearances.)

I will always be deeply grateful to have had the privilege of knowing and working with Nam June Paik. In addition to his brilliance, he was so very kind, and generous. When he asked me to travel to Europe and make co-production deals, I asked why me and not him? He said, "They would not take me seriously. But you, they will." He trusted me, always, and I strived mightily to justify his trust.

In 1988 I was "downsized" by WNET; then my husband and I adopted a baby girl. I went back to work three years later, but no longer in public TV. Then, tragically, Nam June had a stroke. Though we continued to exchange holiday greetings, I saw him only a few more times after he was wheelchair-bound.

When I received the devastating news of Nam June's death, I cried for days (more than when my own father died). Nam June was not only an extraordinary mentor, but truly a professional "father" to me. I miss him terribly, still.